Claims

1. In a real-time computer discussion system having a central computer system with which each of multiple user computers are in communication such that a common sequence and set of messages are
5 transmitted among the user computers as substantially real-time messages of a discussion between users of the user computers, the system including a computer-readable medium that stores computer software instructions for operating the system, the improvement comprising:

computer software instructions stored on the computer-
10 readable medium for providing plural sessions of communication between any of the user computers and the central computer system, users of the user computers participating in the discussion during the sessions; and

computer software instructions stored on the computer-
readable medium for rendering on the user computers a summary of
15 participation in the discussion by the users during the plural sessions.

2. The system of claim 1 further comprising computer software instructions stored on the computer-readable medium for rendering on the user computers the common sequence and set of messages simultaneously with the summary of participation in the discussion by the
20 users.

3. The system of claim 2 in which the summary of participation in the discussion by the users and the common sequence and set of messages are rendered as separate and distinct panes of the user computers.

25 4. The system of claim 1 further comprising computer software instructions stored on the computer-readable medium for rendering on the user computers the common sequence and set of messages not simultaneously with the summary of participation in the discussion by the users.

5. The system of claim 1 further comprising computer software instructions stored on the computer-readable medium for persistently maintaining and providing to the user computers the messages of the discussion.

5   6. The system of claim 1 in which the messages of the discussion are not persistently maintained and are provided to each user computer while it is in one of the communication sessions.

7. The system of claim 1 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes user identifying information for identifying users

10   who have participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

8. The system of claim 1 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes participating user information for identifying . users who are currently participating in the discussion.

9. The system of claim 1 in which the summary of participation

15   in the discussion includes discussion entry information for identifying when users most recently participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

10. The system of claim 1 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes discussion exit information for

20   identifying when users who are not currently participating in the discussion most recently stopped participating.

11. The system of claim 1 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes session participation information indicating a number of sessions during which each user participated in the

25   discussion.

12. The system of claim 1 in which ones of the messages are designated as being of at least first and second selected message types, the summary of participation in the discussion including message type information indicating numbers of at least the first and second selected

30   message types provided to the discussion by each user.

13. The system of claim 12 in which the at least first and second selected message types include at least two of a thread message type, a question message type, an answer message type, and a comment message type.

5   14. In a real-time computer discussion system having a central computer system with which each of multiple user computers are in communication such that a common sequence and set of messages are transmitted among the user computers as substantially real-time messages of a discussion between users of the user computers over plural sessions

10   of communication between any of the user computers and the central computer system, the system including a computer-readable medium that stores computer software instructions for operating the system, a data structure stored on the computer-readable medium for each user, comprising:

15   a user identifying information field for identifying users who have participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

15. The system of claim 14 further comprising a participating user information field for identifying users who are currently participating in the discussion.

20   16. The system of claim 14 further comprising a discussion entry information field for identifying when users most recently participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

17. The system of claim 14 further comprising a discussion exit information field for identifying when users who are not currently

25   participating in the discussion most recently stopped participating.

18. The system of claim 14 further comprising a session participation information field indicating a number of sessions during which each user participated in the discussion.

19. The system of claim 14 in which ones of the messages are

30   designated as being of at least first and second selected message types,

the system further comprising a message type information field indicating numbers of at least the first and second selected message types provided to the discussion by each user.

20. The system of claim 19 in which the at least first and
5 second selected message types include at least two of a thread message type, a question message type, an answer message type, and a comment message type.

21. In a real-time computer discussion system having a central computer system with which each of multiple user computers are in
10 communication such that a common sequence and set of messages are transmitted among the user computers as substantially real-time messages of a discussion between users of the user computers over plural sessions of communication between any of the user computers and the central computer system, the user computers including display screens and the
15 substantially real-time messages being rendered on the display screens, a graphical user interface rendered on the display screens, comprising:

a summary of participation in the discussion by the users during the plural sessions.

22. The system of claim 21 in which the summary of
20 participation in the discussion includes user identifying information for identifying users who have participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

23. The system of claim 21 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes participating user information for
25 identifying users who are currently participating in the discussion.

24. The system of claim 21 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes discussion entry information for identifying when users most recently participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

25. The system of claim 21 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes discussion exit information for identifying when users who are not currently participating in the discussion most recently stopped participating.

5   26. The system of claim 21 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes session participation information indicating a number of sessions during which each user participated in the discussion.

27. The system of claim 21 in which ones of the messages are

10   designated as being of at least first and second selected message types, the summary of participation in the discussion including message type information indicating numbers of at least the first and second selected message types provided to the discussion by each user.

28. The system of claim 27 in which the at least first and

15   second selected message types include at least two of a thread message type, a question message type, an answer message type, and a comment message type.

29. In a real-time computer discussion system having a central computer system with which each of multiple user computers are in

20   communication such that a common sequence and set of messages are transmitted among the user computers as substantially real-time messages of a discussion between users of the user computers, a method comprising:

providing plural sessions of communication between any of the

25   user computers and the central computer system, users of the user computers participating in the discussion during the sessions; and

rendering on the user computers a summary of participation in the discussion by the users during the plural sessions.

30. The method of claim 29 further comprising rendering on

30   the user computers the common sequence and set of messages

simultaneously with the summary of participation in the discussion by the users.

    31. The method of claim 30 in which the summary of participation in the discussion by the users and the common sequence and

5   set of messages are rendered on separate and distinct panes of the user computers.

    32. The method of claim 29 further comprising rendering on the user computers the common sequence and set of messages not simultaneously with the summary of participation in the discussion by the

10   users.

    33. The method of claim 29 further persistently maintaining and providing to the user computers the messages of the discussion.

    34. The method of claim 29 in which the messages of the discussion are not persistently maintained and are provided to each user

15   computer while it is in one of the communication sessions.

    35. The method of claim 29 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes user identifying information for identifying users who have participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

20   36. The method of claim 29 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes participating user information for identifying users who are currently participating in the discussion.

    37. The method of claim 29 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes discussion entry information for

25   identifying when users most recently participated in the discussion during any of the plural sessions.

    38. The method of claim 29 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes discussion exit information for identifying when users who are not currently participating in the discussion

30   most recently stopped participating.

39. The method of claim 29 in which the summary of participation in the discussion includes session participation information indicating a number of sessions during which each user participated in the discussion.

5   40. The method of claim 29 in which ones of the messages are designated as being of at least first and second selected message types, the summary of participation in the discussion including message type information indicating numbers of at least the first and second selected message types provided to the discussion by each user.

10   41. The method of claim 40 in which the at least first and second selected message types include at least two of a thread message type, a question message type, an answer message type, and a comment message type.

15